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Staurin Ma Lane: Chinese Verse in Scots and English. Translated by Brian Holton. Pp. 144. Shearsman, 2016. Pb. £12.95.

Brian Holton claims to be – with some justice I think – the ‘only Chinese-Scots translator in captivity’. This carefully designed book presents some of the major styles and subgenres of classical Chinese poetry in both English and what Robert Louis Stevenson called an ‘illustrious and malleable tongue’: lowland Scots. Holton includes his own English versions – which are translations of the Scots – purely to assist a non-Scots audience. This is an important move, because *Staurin Ma Lane* contains no glossary, though readers can consult the online *Dictionary of Scots Language* which is available free at www.dsl.ac.uk. The translation of ancient Chinese *shi* or lyrics by Anglo-American poets and professional sinologists over the past century has resulted in target texts that heighten, to a greater or lesser extent, a feeling of stringency, remoteness and exoticism: Pound’s *Cathay*, Arthur Waley’s *Bo Juyi*, Amy Lowell’s *Fir-Flower Tablets*, Kenneth Rexroth’s *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, Gary Snyder’s *Cold Mountain Poems* for example. Holton relocates the originals to a much warmer rhetorical climate. In so doing, he strives to reorient Scottish cultural production as a distinct national zone of translation within the larger global map of ‘Englishes’. In so doing, he strives to reorient lowland Scots as a distinct zone of translation within the larger global map of ‘Englishes’.

Staurin Ma Lane includes two adaptations of folksongs from the oldest surviving collection of Chinese verse, the anonymous *Book of Poetry (Shi Jing)*. This is followed by material from the *Nine Songs* which are traditionally ascribed to the first-named poet in Chinese history, Qu Yuan (343-278BC), and several acolytes writing in his style. Holton’s focus then shifts to seminal figures such as the sober *shisheng* or sage of poetry Du Fu (712-

770), his older and rakish Taoist contemporary Li Bai (701-762), Wang Wei (699–759), the unfairly neglected Qiao Ji (c.1280-1345), and finally Ma Zhiyuan (c.1250-1321), a stylist of intimidating proficiency.

Holton shows an obvious relish for Li Bai, three of whose poems feature in a ‘Prelude’ to this anthology. The carousing Burnsian brio that defines Holton’s Scots version of ‘Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon’ (‘Bouzin Ma Lane Ablow the Mune’) is all the more striking when set against David Hinton’s English translation from his 2008 anthology, *Classical Chinese Poetry* (reviewed in *T & L* 19, 2010):

I sing, and moon rocks back and forth;
I dance, and shadow tumbles into pieces.

Sober, we’re together and happy. Drunk,
we scatter away into our own directions:
(trans. Hinton)

Gin A sing, the mune shoogles back an forrit;
gin A dance, ma sheddae stotters aa aroun:
whan we’re whiskified we’re blithe thegither
but gin we sober up we’ll hae ti pairt –
(trans. Holton)

Holton prioritizes pungency of sound, muscularity of rhythm and easy intimacy of register over Hinton’s studied refinement. In the highly compressed source text, conjunctions and prepositions are sparingly used, the distinction between singular and plural is hazy, and the links between poetic conceits are as ambiguous as the temporal location and sequence, given the lack of verb tenses. That Li Bai’s vocabulary also has the broadest possible resonance has given rise to a notable array of English translations. In Ezra Pound’s famous 1915 version ‘Amongst the flowers is a pot of wine’ the moon merely ‘lingers’ in this scene; for Arthur Waley (1919) it ‘flickers’; for Robert Payne (1958) it ‘loiters’; in William Acker’s 1967 version it ‘begins to reel’; for Keith Holyoak (2005) it ‘sways to and fro’. Holton’s

Holton's botanical specificities – 'spykarie' ('spikenard') 'gingie-flouer' ('ginger-flower') – instead of conveying sheer awe at cosmological phenomena or teeming organic life, tend to distract the non-Scots speaker. Does this flora carry a symbolic or magical significance in the *Nine Songs*? It's not made clear by Holton's text. Hinton's English version, by evoking instead an ambience of heady 'scents' and bright 'blossoms', coupled with the visual design which enacts the meandering movement of the 'spirit-one', better suggests spiritual intoxication – though it is of a very different kind to that recorded by the jovial toper Li Bai earlier. What is more problematic about Holton's Scots version is his pointed use of 'Cailleach' ('an old woman' or 'old maid'). The enduring and incantatory power of the source text partly resides in its rapt recognition of deities of clouds, gorges, rivers, sun, and mountains. But the grammatical indeterminacy of the Chinese lexis merges the distinction between priest/priestess, and the divinities they petition. So it is Hinton's 'spirit-one', rather than Holton's gendered entity, that implies a presence that is as magisterial as it is radically enigmatic.

Like the *Nine Songs*, Du Fu's poems contain many intimations of esoteric lore, or directly graft slivers of textual tissue from venerable religious narratives. Such *miaotang wenxue* ('language of the temples') is not easily brought across into standard English, the reliance of which on particular markers for gender, tense, and number weakens the clipped and allusive verbal fabric of the source. Yet Holton's approach to this much anthologized poet-historian of the Tang Dynasty is assured and yields impressive results. Holton pays close attention to how Du Fu's tightly constructed verse-journeys follow, or complicate, a specific format of dramatic or spiritual development. This is crucial because Du Fu's innovatory flair at the level of poetic organization has been widely celebrated. Rival translations often portray Du Fu as the quietly dignified, benign, and reclusive Confucian as opposed to the roistering sensation-seeker Li Bai. While it is true that Du Fu illuminates the concept of 'reticence' or

hanxu in traditional Chinese poetics, this shouldn't distract from the delight in technical craft/iness that his verse also reveals. Holton's 'Spring Sun on the Watterside Clachan' ('Spring Sun on the Riverside Village') is relevant in this regard. It's worthwhile measuring Holton's Scots target text against the English version that features in Stephen Owen's recently published translation of the complete works of Du Fu (2016):

'River Village on a Spring Day'

In village after village farm work is urgent,
spring currents grow deeper on shore after shore.
Heaven and Earth, eyes that see thousands of leagues;
in the sequence of seasons, heart of life's hundred years.
I can still write poems on my thatched cottage,
Peach Blossom Spring can of course be sought.
in troubled times, blind to making a living,
I've drifted on to the ways things are now.

(trans. Owen)

'Spring Sun on the Watterside Clachan'

Frae toun ti toun, fowk eident at the hairst;
frae bank ti bank, the Watter deep in spate.
Gin A cud see the lang miles o heiven an yirth,
A'd see but the turnin years o aa ma days.
Ma theikit ruif wis warth a pickle poems,
tho in ma hairt it wis Tír na nÓg A socht aye.
Cark an care they smooored the line o ma life –
whit a lang an wearie stravaig ti win here the nou!

(trans. Holton)

Du Fu's favoured eight-line forms – *lü-shi* or 'regulated verse' – possess a grid-like austerity and are tricky enough to capture in standard English, let alone Scots. Regulated verse requires of a translator simultaneous lexical, figurative and syntactic parallelism within a strict prosody – all the while avoiding monotony of rhythm. It is Holton who shows particular dexterity in bringing out Du Fu's rigorous 'tripartite' design here. The introductory couplet evokes the terrain - hypnotic repetition and delicate verbal balancing are part of the

entire unit of sense, which functions vertically ('toun ti toun', 'bank ti bank') as well as horizontally to imply cosmic correspondences and symmetries. These sympathetic resonances are developed in a descriptive internal quatrain (the humble 'theikit ruif' set against the ethereal, measureless canopy 'o heaven an virth'). Owen's 'Peach Blossom Spring' – an Eastern utopia or unspoiled wilderness – becomes in Holton's version 'Tír na nÓg', the 'Land of Youth' located in the western seas from the Gaelic tradition. A concluding couplet conveys the speaker's terse expression of mood, reacting to a scene whose superficially concrete spatial and temporal dimensions give way to a poignant sense of existential ennui.

The intricate verbal masonry of the source text, instead of employing stress or length, exploits the intrinsic pitch contours of the Chinese syllable. So changes in lexis or mood – such as the unexpected rise in affective temperature in Holton's version ('whit a lang an wearie stravaig ti win here the nou!') draws attention to Du Fu's canny fusion of various standpoints and domains: mundane and metaphysical, interior depths and external panorama, the joyless toils of diurnal life and the elemental grandeur of the universe. Holton deserves credit for illustrating how this poetic strategy creates a coherent and convincing formal 'thatch' – every trope buttresses a distinctive aesthetic object – working against the tendency in classical Chinese verse for each line to comprise a self-contained perception.

Hölderlin famously remarked, in an 1801 letter, 'Aber das Eigene muss so gut gelernt sein wie das Fremde' ('But we must master what is native to us to the same extent as what is foreign'). Holton's return to the 'native' helps us see the foreignness of these classical Chinese source texts anew. It's an irony not fully addressed by Holton's brief 'Afterword' that for some of his fellow Scots, the 'native' tongue employed in *Staunin Ma Lane* – for all its vital, sinewy grace in the Du Fu poem above – may require sustained effort to 'master'. In Holton's target texts we find Scotticisms of grammar synonymous with 'Scottish Standard English'; localized rural and urban varieties of vernacular speech; archaic and contemporary

argot. But there's a virtue in the very density and eclecticism of Holton's Scots. Ultimately it draws attention to how any language that proclaims a national affiliation – whether so-called 'minority' or 'standard' – is a cultural construct that invites searching critique and incessant 'overturning'. *Staurin Ma Lane*, as the title page tells us, is 'owreset bi Brian Holton'. 'Owreset' or 'translated' points to the traditional Scots connotation of 'overturned' or 'upset', by way of a calque on the German *übersetzen*. It's for Holton's readers to continue this project of dynamic disturbance, affirming a rhetorical repertoire that synthesizes and reinvents Scots vocabulary drawn from all periods of history.

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